
Christian-Muslim Relations 600 - 1500

Epistola salutaris regi Babilonis ab auctore huius operis conscripta

(771 words)

‘Letter *of* greeting to the king *of* Babylon written by the author *of* this work’; ‘Letter to the king *of* Babylon’; ‘Letter to al-Kāmil *of* Egypt’

Oliver *of* Paderborn

Date: September 1221

Original Language: Latin

Description

Written shortly after the defeated crusaders’ conclusion *of* a truce with Sultan al-Kāmil, Oliver’s letter appeals to the sultan’s liberality and benevolence (which he had witnessed first-hand and praised in his *Historia Damiatina*), urging him to free Christian captives and persuade his brother al-Mu‘azzam to return the Holy Land to Christian rule and allow Christians free access to the Temple and other holy sites in Jerusalem. Oliver almost certainly knew *of* Francis *of* Assisi’s attempt to proselytize the sultan and his court, and he had encountered and debated with various representatives *of* eastern Christian and Islamic sects in the East. Oliver’s letter likewise exhorted the Sultan to convert to Christianity, allow the activities *of* Christian missionaries, and conclude a permanent truce with the rulers *of* the Latin Kingdom *of* Jerusalem. After accurately noting that many Muslims shared Christians’ belief in Christ’s virgin conception and birth, his ascension to heaven, and his role in the final judgement, considering him to be a great prophet and the holiest *of* men without sin, Oliver urged al-Kāmil to also recognize Christ’s divinity, his incarnation and redemptive passion and death, and the Christian concept *of* the Trinity.

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Familiar with anti-heretical debating techniques from his theological studies in Paris and the preaching *of* the Albigensian crusade, Oliver followed others *of* his generation in adding arguments based on logic and concepts from the Aristotelian *libri naturales* to the traditional ammunition *of* citations from shared written authorities (the Old and New Testaments) and showed a general awareness *of* certain qur'anic teachings, including Muslim detestation *of* the Christian *veneration of* the Trinity, images, the *saints*, and the Virgin Mary as idolatry. He nonetheless shared with other authors *of* his generation the tendency to depict Islam as a form *of* Christian heresy and to utilize in his critique *of* it images and arguments that were applied to the Cathar heresy and other heresies within Europe. He followed his compatriot Jacques de Vitry in depicting Muḥammad as an illiterate usurping *routier* whose writings were dictated by an apostate Christian monk and a Jew. Both men depicted Islam as similar to the Cathar heresy, claiming that, unlike the rigorous Christian law and spiritual Christian heaven, Islam promoted sexual laxity and promised a paradise *of* carnal delights in order to gain adherents.

Oliver and Jacques also justified continued crusades against Muslim powers by claiming that, whereas Christianity had spread by preaching, miracles, and the Holy Spirit, Islam had been spread through lies and the sword. Drawing on his earlier histories, Oliver claimed that, before Muslim powers had annexed it by divine permission, the Holy Land had been lawfully possessed by the Jews and then the Christians (read as the Roman Empire and its successors, including Charlemagne and the first crusaders) by right as God's chosen people, despite their cyclical alienation *of* divine favor by their sins. Since all laws permitted princes to use the sword to defend their kingdoms and recover their rights, Christians would continue to wage war against the Muslim powers until they recovered their possessions and the teaching and preachers *of* Christ were admitted to their lands.

Significance

This letter illustrates the changing image *of* Islam in the early 13th century and how Christian propagandists argued that it should be countered through a combination *of* missionary and military campaigns. The letter's proposal for a peaceful return *of* the lands conquered by Saladin would form the basis *of* a truce concluded between Frederick II and al-Kāmil in 1229.

Manuscripts

The letter survives in three 13th-century manuscripts, two *of* which contain the third redaction *of* Oliver's *Historia Damiatina*, suggesting that it circulated as crusade propaganda during preparations for the crusade *of* Frederick II.

For details *of* these MSS, see Hoogeweg (ed.), *Schriften*, pp. lxxviii.

Editions & Translations

Hoogeweg (ed.), *Schriften*, pp. lxxviii, 296-307

Studies

J. Bird, 'Crusade and conversion after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215)', pp. 23-48

Tolan, *Saracens*, esp. pp. 194-255

Von den Brinken, 'Islam und Oriens Christianus in den Schriften des Kölner Domscholastikers Oliver', pp. 86-102

Kedar, *Crusade and mission*, pp. 116-33

Hoogeweg (ed.), *Schriften*

Keywords

Chronological Category: 1200-1250

Thematic Region: Egypt, Palestine

Dynasty/Ruling elite: Ayyubids

Genre & Source Type: Disputations, Letters

Theme: Anti-Muslim polemic, Christian portrayal *of* Muhammad, Christian writings on other faiths, Christian-Muslim warfare, Missionaries

Social History: Christian influence on Islam, Conversion, Crusades, Embassies, Exchange *of* prisoners, Peace treaties, Prisoners *of* war

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